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Writing a Catastrophe. Describing and Constructing Disaster Perception in Narrative Sources from the Late Middle Ages

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Abstract: »Eine Katastrophe schreiben. Zur Schilderung und Konstruktion von Katastrophenwahrnehmung in erzählenden Quellen des Spätmittelalters«. The perception of natural hazards as catastrophes is specific to humanity. In textual sources of the Late Middle Ages, a representation of catastrophic events is evident through the use of language and stylistic elements. Imitations of biblical depictions of catastrophes, such as the plague of locusts, serve to evoke interpretations of a coming apocalypse or punishment by God. Floods are presented as catastrophic through “canonized” motifs in reports of destroyed bridges, flooded church buildings or through the consideration present in the text that the event was worse than any in living memory. Artistic and artificial hyperbolisms are especially frequent in educated early humanistic literature that depicts an event with reference to historical or literary examples. The actual extent of such “constructed” catastrophes is only capable of being estimated through a comparison with other contemporary descriptions of the event.

“Only man knows natural disasters,
so far as he survives them.
Nature does not know disasters.”
(FRISCH 1986, p. 271, translation C. Rohr)

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Introduction

It is rare to find a depiction of a natural catastrophe that is more poignant than the dictum of Max Frisch in his late piece “Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän” (“Man in the Holocene. A Story”) from 1979. He makes it particularly clear that the most important aspect of a natural catastrophe is mankind’s perception of it as such. That which has been preserved concerning natural hazards of the past is, from a modern perspective, regardless of whether in imagery, text or other objects, an interpretation of the natural event based on human perception.

It is therefore interesting when observing the sources to observe the criteria that lead to the perception of catastrophe, such as the unexpected nature of the event or the inability to explain it (ROHR, 2006, p. 51-57). Also of considerable importance is the analysis of how these events are depicted in written texts. The representations of catastrophes in the form of specific and recurring motifs, based on the descriptive patterns from authoritative texts such as the bible, is demonstrable.

In the following, three forms of linguistic constructions of catastrophes will be presented and analyzed: firstly, the close imitation of biblical motifs wherein the event is stylized as apocalyptic or as a plague visited upon mankind by God, regardless of how severe the damage actually was; secondly, the establishment of a “canon” of motifs that late medieval chroniclers use when describing severe floods; and thirdly, the educated and literary exaggeration of relatively ordinary natural events as catastrophic.

The Power of the Bible

The bible not only influenced the way of thinking during the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times, but also the entire field of literature as no other text before or since. It is therefore not surprising that numerous depictions of natural hazards imitate biblical passages in terms of language and style, indeed the knowledge of the biblical passage in the bible enabled the author to outline the unspeakable nature of the catastrophe. The language and motifs of the bible are most notable in regards to the depictions of two events: the Deluge and the plague of locusts.

The report of a great flood (*diluvium*) that appears in numerous cultures as part of the creation myth serves as the archetypical flood that washes away the sins of the world. The characteristic aspect of punishment is apparent in many such cases.

Only at first glance does it seem appropriate to expect depictions of floods in keeping with the model of the Deluge. On the one hand, the people living along the rivers in the eastern Alps and their foothills were so used to high

water that such explanations were not necessary; after all, at the end of the first report of the Deluge (Genesis 8:21-22) it is written that God in his mercy promised that there would never be such a flood again. On the other hand, flooding remained relatively restricted due to the hills and mountains in the landscape; the likelihood that one would lose sight of all land was – except in the far eastern reaches of Austria – exceedingly small. For this reason, associations with the Deluge were more likely to occur in the flat low-lying region by the North Sea than along the Danube River. Of course, also people in the North Sea region were aware of God's promise not to send another Deluge. For this reason, the great floods were named a "partial deluge" or a "little deluge" (JAKUBOWSKI-TIESSEN 2003, p. 109).

Even the term used for the Deluge in the bible, *diluvium*, was only sparingly used for describing floods. It is reasonable to conclude that in reports where the term *diluvium* is used, this is not to be considered as a comparison to the Deluge, but the result of an author searching for a term that could adequately depict the immense amount of water. The *Continuatio canoniconum Sancti Rudberti Salisburgensis* (ed. WATTENBACH 1851, p. 822) from Salzburg uses the term to describe the three extreme floods of the year 1316; they are mentioned as "partial deluge" (*particulare diluvium*), which makes clear that it is not depicting a recurrence of the Deluge, but rather an event that in many respects bears characteristics of the Deluge. The author of the Chronicle of Koenigssaal in Bohemia (*Chronica Aulae Regiae*, ed. LOSERT 1875, p. 379) also compares the floods of 1316 with the Deluge (*more diluvii*) in order to emphasize the large quantity of water. The two devastating floods of 1508 are similarly described by the annalist from Melk; he too speaks of a "partial deluge" (*diluvium particulare*) of the Danube River (*Continuatio Mellicensis*, ed. WATTENBACH 1851, p. 528f.; ROHR 2006, p. 226f.; ROHR 2007a, p. 82-84).

Two fifteenth century reports from the *Notae Hallenses* composed in Bad Reichenhall (Upper Bavaria), however, do not reflect this schema: for the floods of 1424 and 1426, which resulted in a strong rise of the (salty) springs, the anonymous author utilizes the formula "there had been a deluge or flood" (*fuit diluvium sew inundacio aquarum*) (*Notae Hallenses*, ed. LANG 1997, p. 94). The actual semantic emphasis of *diluvium* as the Great Flood appears here as a pleonasmus in the text and as a synonym for *inundacio*, when describing an event that was far removed from the dimensions of the Deluge. It was likely the financial considerations resulting from the outage of the salt mines that made the flood noteworthy; the second of which was however recorded as the largest flood in forty years.

A particular form of the *diluvium*-description is to be observed in purely literary sources. John of Viktring compares the large flood of 1342, which affected many parts of Europe, with a second *cathaclismus* (Johannes abbas Victoriensis, *Liber certarum historiarum* ad a. 1342, ed. SCHNEIDER 1909-

1910 vol. 2, p. 226; ROHR 2006, p. 215) and utilizes thereby a Greek term to describe the flood that denotes his great learning. Thereto he uses a verse from Lucanus that establishes a link to the antique myth of the great flood by Deukalion and Pyrrha (Lucanus, *Pharsalia* 1, 653, ed. SHACKLETON BAILEY 1988, p. 23).

In Enea Silvio Piccolomini's description of the extreme weather in 1445, it is not likely to have come to large scale flooding, but the author compares it with such mythic archetypes that one is forced to consider the largest floods of the antique, or even the Deluge itself, when he describes the purported amounts of heavy rainfall. This report will be discussed in detail below.

The artistic flood mark in Linz from 1501, with its poetic Latin inscription, also uses the term *diluvium*, but the comparison is drawn primarily due the fact that only the birds who were perched on the roofs could report on the large scale flooding – the roofs of the houses thereby assume the function of the biblical Mount Ararat (ROHR 2006, p. 367f.):

Look, I am the sign, how big the flood was,
whose witness had been a bird from the swamp,
which sat sadly on the roofs at the very time,
when the sorrowful flood (*diluvium triste*) took place.

Only starting in the sixteenth century do the occurrences of *diluvium* in the eastern Alps begin to increase. Ottavia Niccoli postulated in 1990 that the development of the term *diluvium* started in Italy and is first recognizable in the late fifteenth century (NICCOLI 1990, p. 143f.). The deforestation of the Apennines contributed significantly to flooding at that time. This does not take into account the fact that the use of *diluvium* appears in earlier, albeit rare, sources from the German speaking realm; examples of such usage also appear in the Rhineland (MENTGEN 2005, p. 147f.).

The phantom menace foretold by prophecy, a great flood that should strike Europe in February of 1524, was viewed as a real approaching catastrophe. Based on the medieval prophecies of catastrophe contained in the so-called Toledo Letter, and from the calculations of the Tübingen astrologist Johann Stoeffler, the opinion and fear was spread throughout Europe that a flood of epic proportions was to strike in 1524 that heralded the coming of the end of the world. The discussion of this event was spread throughout Europe via pamphlets and ultimately discredited the field of astrology when the flood did not occur (MENTGEN 2005, passim; ROHR 2006, p. 500-502). From this point on, the idea of a recurrence of the Deluge, even if it was a *diluvium particulare*, was on everyone's lips.

Further, it can be observed that the usage of the term *diluvium* became more frequent throughout the period of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation due to the increasing influence of theology when interpreting patterns of extreme natural phenomenon, which can also be seen in the interpretation of events such as earthquakes. This is due in part to the fact that the theo-

numerological calculation of the word DILVVIUM – in Roman numerals – equals 1567, which lead to speculation that in the year 1567 another Deluge would occur. The Latin term thus acquired the secondary meaning of “extreme high water”, which can of course be viewed as complementary to the meaning of “Great Flood”.

When viewing the documentation for the eastern Alps, only rarely is a concrete reference to the report of the Deluge as found in the book of Genesis identifiable, although the use of the word *diluvium* to denote a large flood does occur. In contrast, the people of the Late Middle Ages did think on the plagues and apocalyptic prophecies of the bible when locust infestations took place. The reports concerning the great plague of locusts from 1338-1341 and in the 1470s are composed for the most part using the models from the bible: the eighth plague that God sent against the Egyptians (Exodus 10:3-19), the visions of horror in the Book of Joel (Joel 1:2-2:11) and the revelations of John (Revelation 9:1-11).

Whereas the plagues of frogs, mosquitoes and vermin had little impact on the mentalities of medieval common people or their depictions of similar plagues, the description of the locusts substantially influenced their perception and interpretation of such naturally occurring events. In numerous sources from the Middle Ages, locusts are described as the heavily armoured soldiers of an invading army, with a helm of iron and teeth even harder than iron that mow down corn and wheat like scythes. Even the swarm formation of locusts is described in military terms. Thereto the reasons given for their appearance were taken from the bible: just as the Pharaoh stubbornly refused to bow to the will of God and free the Israelites, so, the people of the Middle Ages refused to renounce their accustomed and sinful lifestyle. People that do not recognize the sign to repent are to be punished by God with new plagues.

Through a comparison of frequently occurring motifs, it is clear that the reports of late medieval or early modern plagues of locusts are so closely related to their biblical models in stylistic and linguistic terms, that the significance of their appearance must be considered in relative terms. On the other hand, from a cultural and mentality-bound history perspective this is quite significant, for it demonstrates how formative the bible was for the perception and interpretation-horizon of locust swarms. Thus locusts ‘had to’ be viewed as a catastrophe, even when the actual damage was likely restricted to a few kilometre-wide strip that ran through Europe and the financial effects weren’t particularly substantial.

Thus it must be asked, if the locusts were really the “killer army” as they were depicted, which itself is a description inspired by the prophet Joel as presented in medieval sources, or if the fear of the locusts themselves was just far greater than the damage they actually caused. Before the sixteenth century, it is noteworthy that there are no instances of grain prices increasing due to plagues of locusts (ROHR 2006, p. 454-458; ROHR 2007b [forthcoming]).

Regardless, the biblical association in people's perception and written transcriptions of such events is a certain indicator that plagues of locusts were viewed as catastrophic whether or not they resulted in deleterious financial conditions.

“The Saints are getting wet feet”

The catastrophic character of an event is depicted in numerous sources not only with recourse to the bible, but also with motifs that are taken from first hand experience of the event. This enables us to compose a catalogue of reported elements that can generally serve as an indicator of when people experienced hazards as natural disasters or as normal weather events. This will be showcased in the following with examples from depictions of floods.

Here, the report from Michael de Leone of Würzburg will serve as a representative example of the numerous reports documenting the “Millennial Flood” of 1342. This report can be considered an eye witness report and contains all of the typical elements that can be found in other reports about this event in 1342 (Michael de Leone, *Annotata Historica* ad a. 1342, ed. BÖHMER 1843, p. 469; WEIKINN 1958 vol. 1, p. 210; English translation C. Rohr):

Afterwards, again in the year 1342, on Sunday, 21st July, at the feast of the blessed Praxedis and also on the eve of the feast of saint Mary Magdalene, the Main River at Würzburg rose so much by the flood from dawn to noon that the famous stone bridge of Würzburg broke down immediately with its towers and walls as well as the walls of the city and even a lot of stone houses all over there. This flood also streamed extraordinarily over the stairs of the portico of the church of Würzburg and nearly touched the statues made of stone (*prope primas statuas lapideas excessive affluxit*). In addition to that, all wooden and stone bridges above and below the city were destroyed. Much deplorable damage happened to the urban and rural properties along the whole Main River.

In this time, there were incredibly huge floods also in other parts of the world. In those days, all subterranean fountains seemed to have been broken (*quasi rupte sunt omnes fontes aquarum abyssi*), the big sluices of heaven were open (*magne catheracte aperte sunt celi*), and there was rain like in the 600th year of Noah's life, as can be read about the Deluge in the middle of the seventh chapter of the book of Genesis.

The first part of the report is kept factual and describes the result of the catastrophe with a few details: all of the bridges, even the stone bridge of Würzburg, were destroyed; houses, towers and city walls collapsed, property in rural and urban areas destroyed; thereto the water even rose to the steps of the church. The second part, in contrast, arouses attention for its comparison to biblical reports of the Deluge – a very rare motif, even in the reports surrounding the events of 1342. It should be noted, however, that this is less an under-

standing of the flood as a punishment from God, but rather used to describe the heavy rainfall. Certainly this comparison expresses the general sense of crisis of the time: only a few years earlier, numerous waves of locust swarms had inflicted heavy damage in Franconia. Thereto the commentary influenced by the Aristotelian-scholastic movement arouses interest through the mentioning of water swelling forth from the earth.

Let me now come to a report on the flood in January and February 1374 on the Rhine River. It was the result of a very mild winter and continuous heavy rain. As far as can be discerned from other sources, this flood caused some damage to the cities along the Rhine and its catch area, but appears to have been of far different scope than the flood of 1342. Nevertheless, the author of the so-called World Chronicle of Cologne gives us a very vivid impression of the perception and management of the flood. The chronicle was completed two or three years after the flood. This enables us to presume that the author was an eyewitness of the flood and wrote down his observations shortly after the event (*Chronicon Coloniense* ad a. 1374, ed. SPRANDEL 1991, p. 115f.; English translation C. Rohr).

In this time, in the year of God 1374, in the months of January and February, there was a very big and tremendous flood (*diluvium aquarum maximum et stupendum*) in various regions. The Rhine River rose so heavily that, according to the reliable judgement of the people watching the water of this river, it rose 34 feet higher and even more than the level normally was, and beyond that the river flooded everything. However, the waters of the Rhine River passing by occupied the city of Cologne, which is situated along the riverside. So, the people inside the city went along by boat in many areas (*homines infra civitatem in multis eiusdem locis navigio ferebantur*). But the waters did not only flow with a powerful stream through the part of the town, where the Rhine River runs through, but also through the part, which is situated near the countryside. Its waters impetuously occupied and filled all moats of the city up to the top, but they also streamed inside the city through joints and gaps, through the paths and the embankments, on which the groundwork of the city walls is erected. Finally, the people from the town came together from everywhere and brought material in order to build dikes; they ploughed the fields and could divide the stream of the water on the plain fields. So, the waters were detained and turned away from the town.

What a wonderful change of God's hand! During the time of the flood, however, the carnival feast was forthcoming, during which the people traditionally used to dine and dance together and they came together for public spectacles. But in these days the people were frightened by a such big flood, and they changed the profane character of the feast into a better one: The clergymen announced public litanies and processions in honour of God and the saints, and a large crowd flocked together with devotion and repentance to the churches and the relics of the saints like in a contest. Therefore, on the last day of the processions, the 11th of February, when the divine services and the holy masses had been finished, the flood began to decrease and the waters to go down; God in his mercy had arranged it like that.

Again, we find the motif that the water streamed inside the town and inundated the streets, not only along the riverside, but also in the part of the town situated near the countryside. The author seems to have some detailed knowledge about how the water could occupy the city centre. Also, the following passage relating details of the management of the flood makes it clear that the citizens of Cologne had become accustomed to frequent flooding and knew how to detour the water away from the city by constructing dykes in the neighbouring fields.

The large carnival feast in Cologne was cancelled because of the flood in 1374. Obviously, the ecclesiastical authorities used the flood as an excuse to restrict the sexual and alcohol-related excesses that resulted from celebrating carnival, and used this opportunity to try and lead the population to repent its sins.

The flood in the middle of August in the year 1501 was likely the largest to have struck the Danube catch area in recorded history. They began in the Alpine region and the wide spread heavy rainfall over the eastern Alps and their foothills resulted in massive flooding of all large and small rivers in the catch area of the Danube, i.e. the Bavarian Danube, the Inn-Salzach region, the Traun and the Enns. Thereto numerous watercourses in Bohemia (BRÁZDIL et al. 2005, p. 207f., 354f.) and central Germany (Thuringia, Saxony und Saxony-Anhalt) (FÜGNER 2003, p. 10-17) were effected.

Monastic Annals, such as the continuation of the Melk Annals of 1501, emphatically relate the consequences of the flood. The author doubtless observed the flood from the safe heights of the monastery as an eye witness (*Continuatio Mellicensis* ad a. 1501, ed. WATTENBACH 1851, p. 527f.; English translation ROHR 2005, p. 73):

In this year, there was a very heavy flood (*maxima aquarum inundacio*), which started on the day before the Ascension of Mary [14th August] and lasted for nearly ten days. Within 100 years, hardly anyone could remember such a high flood, as a 107-year-old woman from the village testified. The grain and hay, which was just going to be harvested, was destroyed by the Danube, and the just cut grain mouldered after heavy rains. The water streamed through all parts of the cities and fortified places along the Danube River so copiously that they seemed to be navigable. The flood thoroughly destroyed houses, and when it passed Melk, it carried away eastwards two houses together with their inhabitants. The flood covered the meadows and pastures with sand, threw down trees and uprooted the vines; strong farmsteads with their barns and all kinds of household facilities were swept away during the nights and days. Finally, the Danube River destroyed so much inside the major towns and villages that hardly any house remained undamaged. One part of the people laughed, one part cried (*pars una populi ridebat, pars altera flebat*). In Austria and also in some parts of Bohemia a large number of people died in the slough during the night, and they became like fish according to the prophecy of Habakkuk. The flood also entered the parish church of

the blessed Virgin Mary at Melk and rose to a level one inch higher than the altar; it also destroyed the benches inside and the graveyard.

Apart from the sober reports of the damage to buildings and fields, the report contains numerous noteworthy details: for one, two houses were especially mentioned which were swept away by the flood along with their inhabitants. This makes clear that even during large scale flooding there were apparently few casualties because the rise of the water was anticipated and most people were able to remove themselves to a safe location. The inhabitants of the houses swept away by the Danube did not manage to flee, whatever the reason is. However, details of people coming to harm remain a very small exception in such reports. Secondly, the mentioning of even the oldest individual not being able to remember such an event gives voice to the perception of the event as a catastrophe. When a flood of such dimensions is not in living memory, then the population cannot anticipate it. Thirdly, the catastrophic extent of the flood is expressed in the closing passage. When a flood reached the church – which for the most part were constructed on an elevated piece of land – then apparently even the saints could not prevent the flood (ROHR 2005, p. 72-74).

Finally, we encounter the unique commentary that some of the population laughed and others cried at the extent of the flooding. Likely, this is less an indication of morbid humour or malicious joy resulting from social conflict, than a typical emotional reaction to extreme psychological stress. According to Helmuth Plessner, both laughter and weeping causes people to lose their usual level of control over their bodies and causes them to experience a “border situation”. Particularly in situations of despair which – as opposed to difficult circumstances – have no viable solutions, laughter and weeping are “expressions of disorientation” that result from the individual’s “recognition of his own powerless” (PLESSNER ³1961, p. 148f., 177, 193f.). Thereto laughter is considered a natural reaction when people are suddenly relieved from fear and tension (BERGER 1998, p. 53-58). Laughter as a reaction to extreme natural hazards is only mentioned one other time at the end of the Middle Ages in reference to an avalanche near the Swiss Ofen Pass (Fuorn Pass) that buried 400 men from the army of Maximilian I in the year 1499; all of those struck by the avalanche survived (ROHR 2006, p. 384). It is notable that all cultural-historical publications on the history of laughter (and weeping), including those making of studying these phenomena in the Middle Ages, do not include even distantly related examples. Only Jacques LeGoff makes a general reference to Sigmund Freud’s work published in 1905, “Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten” (“Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious”), according to which laughter stems from a sense of superiority, from impropriety and as a process of relaxation (FREUD 1905/ 1999; LE GOFF 2004, p. 28f.). These latter two types fit the scenario depicted by the flood in 1501. A “laughter of impropriety” occurs primarily when an individual recognizes something that is incongruent with accepted natural or social standards. With regard to Freud’s

so-called 'relief theory', concerning relaxation or the sparing of self, the individual who laughs spares himself the trouble of expressing something that (due motivation or reasons therefore) is difficult to express. These three representative reports enable the discernment of the following recurrent narrative motifs:

a. The lack of a similar catastrophic event in living memory

It is often mentioned in descriptions of catastrophes that nobody could remember such an event. The exceptional nature of this event can thus be considered as basically true, especially if the memories of the elderly could not serve as a warning. For the floods of 1501, not even a woman aged 107 could recall such a tragedy.

b. The destruction of all bridges

Bridges were imminently important for settlements along a river. The bridge tolls guaranteed a constant income – one of the most important reason for living close to a river. Bridges also connected the individual quarters of a city or two cities on opposite sides of a river. Thereto, bridges frequently served to support urban water supply lines, the destruction of which could cause difficulties in hygiene. Damage to individual bridges caused by annual flooding was not unusual, but in the event that all bridges were destroyed, this was literally a collapse of the local transport, finance and hygiene infrastructure.

c. The necessity of transport by boat within cities

Sources also frequently report how water could not be averted or blocked by the city walls and flooded the centre of the city. This resulted in submerged cellars and shops that were constructed at ground level. In worst-case scenarios, walls were so washed out that city walls and houses were threatened by collapse. The water stood so high in the streets that people could only move about by boat or had to leave their houses via the roof after the water overran the city walls. Whereas the ability to traverse certain streets by boat is realistic, it is unlikely this was the case with entire cities; that the water was even higher than the city walls is a relatively frequent recurring motif, the reality of which is qualified by the fact that under the term city wall, a relatively small earthen rampart is to be understood.

d. The feet of the statues of the saints in the church are submerged

The flood marks in the narrative sources of the Late Middle Ages are primarily given in reference to locations within the churches. Some reports of heavy flooding are even comprised primarily of how high the water stood in various churches throughout the city. The anonymous chronicler of the Frankfurt Chronicle describes the flooding of the Main River in 1342 by relating which streets stood under water and which churches were damaged to what extent (WEIKINN 1958, p. 206f.). If the altar and the church pews were submerged or the water rose to cover the feet of the statues of the saints, this was perceived as

a catastrophe; at such a time, even the saints could not provide protection from the flooding, indeed they themselves were not spared.

From a tempest to the Deluge

An exceptional report of the heavy hail storms of spring in the year 1445 that apparently stretched from Bavaria into the eastern reaches of Lower Austria and resulted in destructive flooding, can be found in the letters of the humanist Enea Silvio Piccolomini (1404-1464) who was a secretary to Friedrich III in Austria during the 1440s. His report of hail storms and flood damage is composed in the educated style of humanism. At first he soberly relates the course of events and the results of the storm (Enea Silvio Piccolomini, epist. 177, ed. WOLKAN 1909, p. 524; German translation KUCHER 2002, p. 108; English translation C. Rohr):

For many years no one heard of such a flood (*annis pluribus inauditum est tot aquas inundavisse*) like that which we ourselves watched rise in the new city quarter of Vienna. ... In just two hours such a storm arose, of such magnitude, that one thought the Danube would flow straight into the city; even neighbours dared not go out to see each other. Hail fell from the sky that was as big as eggs, lightning flashed and thunder clapped everywhere. In short order the stream that flowed around the city walls of Vienna swelled so greatly that numerous houses were swept away with kith and kin. Near the Bavarian city of Straubing also cattle and people were killed by the tempest. Numerous fields next to the river were washed away, the topsoil and the fruits thereof.

This report only appears at first glance to be an accurate portrayal of events. Piccolomini was in Wiener Neustadt during the storm. But then without explanation he transitions to the situation in Vienna itself, which he could only have learned of by word of mouth. Everything suggests a heavy hail storm that caused the stream to swell threateningly in short order and inflicted considerable damage due to the brief intense rainfall. This is followed in the report by increasingly fantastic comparisons with antique, mythological and biblical floods which ultimately reveals the report as an educated overexaggeration (Enea Silvio Piccolomini, epist. 177, ed. WOLKAN 1909, p. 524; German translation KUCHER 2002, p. 108f.; English translation C. Rohr):

Mostly, God sent snow and cruel hail from heaven, with flaming power he shook the tallest temples, he ruled over the people and the cities, and the people feared the return of the dreadful era of Pyrrha and Deucalion, or, as we say it, the era of Noah during which the Great Flood submerged all mountains (*omnes montes diluvium inundavit*), [...] Once, under the rule of Augustus, the Tiber River rose over the Etruscan banks, driven by lightning, and it rolled to the monument of King Numa Pompilius and the Vesta Temple, as it would often do later, as is related in the stone inscriptions of the Brothers of Minerva in Rome.

Of course, the flood following the hail storm in May of 1445 could not reach the dimensions of a “Deluge”: the Greco-Roman saga of the Great Flood reports that only two just individuals, Deucalion and Pyrrha, survived the flood in a crate. When the water had receded and all that was left was desolate land, they cast stones which became plants, animals and people (Ovidius, *Metamorphoses* 1, 245-413, ed. ANDERSON 2001, p. 9-14). Even the legendary flooding of the Tiber River in Rome was not suitable as a comparison. It is interesting to note however that Piccolomini transitions from an interpretation of the antique flooding of the Tiber River into propaganda for the then ruling Emperor Friedrich (Enea Silvio Piccolomini, epist. 177, ed. WOLKAN 1909, p. 524; German translation KUCHER 2002, p. 109; English translation C. Rohrer):

At that time, the Romans thought that the river, much like a god, wanted to avenge the death of Julius (Caesar), to appease Ilia, the mother of Romulus and Remus, from whom Caesar was descended. [...] Others saw in the flood an omen of the civil war that was to later break out. [...] But what, Leonhard [Velsecker, the addressee of the letter], oracle of things to come, should we say this flood (*diluvium*) portends? Such unusual things never occur unless to warn of dire events, but then again, it is never Judgement Day. For that which is harmful to some, is useful to others. Emperor Friedrich is already underway to Hungary with the army, already the cowed enemy begs for peace. A contract is being written [...] and that, I believe, is what this weather portended.

The entirety of the literary devices used to depict this understanding of a new Deluge crystallizes in the attempt to provide oracular meaning: such extreme natural phenomena are portents, not of the Final Judgement, but of contemporary events. In order that this might not be understood as negative for his liege lord, it is simply inverted: let the Hungarians be disadvantaged, but bring Friedrich the desired military success.

Based on the description by Piccolomini it is difficult to tell how extensive the flooding of 1445 in Austria really was. This is dependant on the understanding of his report as that of either a heavy hail storm that affected broad portions of the Danube River from Lower Bavaria to eastern Lower Austria, or as heavy rainfall caused by severe thunderstorms. The first part of the report suggests the hail version, which however would hardly have led to long term flooding. Floods are however recorded for June of 1445 in Bohemia and the catch area of the Elbe and Oder Rivers in central Germany (WEIKINN 1958, p. 371f.). In the records of the bridge master’s accounts of Wels, we find flooding with damage in May of that year. That these damages were extensive is witnessed by a document that Friedrich III granted the city of Wels on the 26th of June 1445, which was to help quickly restore the damage to the bridge from flooding (ROHR 2004, p. 291f., 305f.; ROHR 2006, p. 267). A chronicle from Klosterneuburg near Vienna clarifies the extreme weather conditions in 1445: according to these records, on the 6th of May it snowed, on the 23rd of May a hailstorm inflicted heavy damage in the region of Vienna, its villages, fields

and vineyards, and even cost resulted in fatalities (*Continuatio Claustroneoburgensis* V ad a. 1445, ed. WATTENBACH 1851, p. 741).

This makes clear, that Piccolomini combined the late snowfall from the beginning of May with the hail storm from the 23rd of May in order to construct his depiction of a large-scale flood utilizing comparisons with the biblical Deluge as well as citing the Greco-Roman myth of Deucalion and Pyrrha and the Great Flood as depicted by Ovid (ROHR 2006, p. 323-326; ROHR 2007a, p. 99-101).

Conclusions

These examples have shown that in the written sources of the Late Middle Ages, reports of catastrophic events only partially reflect the emotions of those individuals affected. Some of the supposedly sounder sources have been revealed, by closer analysis, as literary fabrications rather than eye witness accounts. Other reports can only be evaluated when they are contextualized in a work and author imminent manner. Finally, the power of the bible in the choice of linguistic and stylistic factors is present to such a great extent in numerous reports, that they can be considered paraphrases of the bible used to describe actual events rather than as an independent description of the event. The question as to the description and construction of natural disasters in linguistic terms demonstrates the all pervasive foundational difficulty in the research of cultural history and the history of mentalities.

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